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AUTHOR Dodson, Charles Brooks
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ABSTRACT

The seeming remoteness of material studied in a British literature survey course can be frustrating for the teacher. Students may find little relevance in the story of Beowulf or the descriptions of Gulliver's voyages. However, instructors can highlight the contemporaneity of British literary texts by drawing parallels to modern times. For instance, Griselda's fate at the hands of a cruel husband in Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" is similar to that of the modern battered wife, and Swift's "Modest Proposal" can be compared to the Nazis' final solution to the Jewish question in its blandness that masks a murderous intent. The writings of Byron, who himself was targeted by gossip befitting a modern-day superstar, reflect environmental concerns. Victorian works include discussions of such persistent problems as urbanization, economic injustice, and the mixed blessing of technology. The early twentieth-century poetry of Thomas Hardy invites consideration of such issues as homelessness and disaster (the Titanic's sinking and its modern counterpart in the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger). With a small amount of introduction, students begin to draw their own present-day analogies to issues raised in classic literature. The result is a survey course that is interesting for student and teacher alike. (SG)

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The Contemporaneity of the British Survey

by
Charles B. Dodson
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

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Of the many problems that can frustrate the teacher of the standard survey of British literature from Beowulf through the twentieth century, a recurring one is the seeming remoteness of the material to many students. Skeptical sophomores--beset by peer pressure to use drugs or have sex, appalled at the latest reports of a berserker machine-gunning a roomful of third graders, wondering if just breathing today will give them lung cancer twenty years from today--may become blase when presented with a mythical Satan's blandishments to a mythical Eve, or Gulliver's description of an Act of Indemnity. What do the tribulations of some rustic in Wordsworth's Lake Country boondocks matter? Or why should they care if that Arnold guy couldn't hold on to his Swiss girlfriend?

Without at all apologizing or insisting defensively on the "relevance" of older literature, I suggest to my students the contemporaneity of much of the material by pointing out specific parallels and applications to our own times. Once we look beneath the features of style or idiom or topic that superficially bind a work to the Middle Ages or Renaissance or Victorian Age, students are often startled to see how frequently the works could be discussing incidents and situations that are reported or dramatized on television or even that they have experienced themselves.

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I once saw Beowulf referred to in a newspaper article as "the first superstar," though I prefer to save that appelation for Byron, as I will explain in a few minutes. The elaborate rules and courtesies of the courtly love tradition that underlie Sir Gawain and the Green Knight sometimes strike students as absurd, but I point out to them that at least the lady didn't have to worry about date rape. When female students complain of the improbability of the patient Griselda's self-effacing, passive acceptance of her husband's cruel humiliations in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale, I remind them of the all-too-frequent example of modern battered wives who not only refuse to turn in their abusive husbands but stay with them or keep returning to them in full knowledge of what lies in store. On a lighter note, I point out that Chaucer's prioress in The Canterbury Tales, named with mischievous inappropriateness "madame Eglentyne," would probably be called something like Debbie or Gidget if he were writing today and wanted to convey the same anomaly between name and calling.

At a crucial point in Othello I make use of an interest that many of the students in my Atlantic-coastal university have: fishing. In the third scene of Act III, as Iago begins to entrap Othello in a net of circumstantial evidence and outright lies, I draw an analogy to Iago as fisherman. First he presents the bait by pretending to speak his thoughts reluctantly and half to himself, thus getting the first nibble from Othello, whose insecurity about Desdemona makes him curious; then when Othello finally bursts out "By heaven I'll know thy thoughts" (III.iii.162), Iago knows Othello is hooked; and from then on Iago plays him craftily, back and forth, setting the hook deeper and deeper with the handkerchief and more lies.

In Book I of Paradise Lost, Satan, realizing that outright military victory against God is not likely, has said that they must continually strive to pervert into evil God's intention "to bring forth good," and that they

> oft-times may succeed, so as perhaps
> Shall grieve him, if I fail not, and disturb
> His inmost counsels from thir destin'd aim. (163-68)

No final victory, then, but they can constantly oppose and harrass God and his plans by waging a sort of eternal guerilla warfare. The first major campaign is, of course, the moral ambush of Adam and Eve, as suggested by Beelzebub, which I compare to the action of the neighborhood bully, who, having picked on the wrong kid and got beaten up for it, decides to poison his conqueror's dog in revenge.

In carrying out his assault, Satan first approaches Eve. Marjorie Hope Nicholson has said that Eve's riposte to Adam about not separating to work in the Garden (IX. 272-89) reminds her of "a somewhat rebellious adolescent daughter" (283). And when, shortly thereafter, Satan tells her that God's prohibition about the Tree of Knowledge is unreasonable and that therefore Eve shouldn't feel bound to comply (IX.758-60), I point out that this is little different from an angry teenage girl's insisting to her parents, "I won't be in by midnight because that's not a reasonable rule, so I shouldn't have to follow it." There are usually several knowing smiles and chuckles in the classroom at this point.

Although the elaborate manners and florid posturings of the characters in Restoration comedy put some of my students off at first, I respond by pointing out that manners change only superficially from

one era to another, and that Wycherley and the other Restoration playwrights, like Suzy Knickerbocker, Hunter Thompson, and Tom Wolfe after them, were simply chronicling the interests, mannerisms, and foibles of the late seventeenth century jet set. The "salutes" with which male and female characters greet each other, for example, are routine pecks on the cheek, like those bestowed on each other by guests on the Johnny Carson show.

Swift's works have their contemporary reverberations, too. Gulliver's description of an Act of Indemnity (bk. 4, ch. 6) brings to mind President Gerald Ford's preemptive pardon of Richard Nixon for his Watergate crimes. And the Houyhnhms' use of selective breeding and strict population control suggests similar policies that many of the students have read about in Huxley's Brave New World.

Even more striking in its application to today, it seems to me, is the "Modest Proposal." The chilling matter-of-factness as Swift's persona details the rationale and benefits of his proposition has its counterpart in our own century's phrases whose blandness masks murderous intent--phrases like "the final solution to the Jewish question" and the Vietnam war's "terminate with extreme prejudice," as well as the statistics of transport with which the Nazis bureaucratized their mass murder of innocent civilians. Moreover, the understated tone and manner of the persona anticipates the modern social engineer or faceless government planner, treating starvation and cannibalism as if they were part of an abstract experiment in agricultural economics.

Our second course in the survey sequence begins, as most do, with the Romantics. Early in our discussion of Wordsworth I casually point

out that the Romantics were the first environmentalists. They didn't yet have much pollution to worry about, I say; it remained for the Victorians to discover that it was no longer safe to eat fish from the Thames. They had never heard of the ozone layer or PCB's or nuclear waste, yet by stressing the interdependence of humanity and nature, they anticipated emotionally and intellectually what our own age has come to recognize in a scientific and technological dimension. They would be horrified by the carbon monoxide levels in our polluted air and would thus have even more reason to prefer the country to "the din/ Of towns and cities" ("Tintern Abbey," 25-26). And, someone in the class may add, just imagine how Wordsworth would react to the way acid rain is destroying forests and streams.

In our day of IRA's and profit sharing, some students who suffer more than others from a lack of historical perspective need to be reminded that Simon Lee lived long before there were retirement funds, social security, and medicare. Or take "The Ruined Cottage": it not only resonates with the problems of the present-day single parent, but parallels, in the poignant description of Robert's plight, that of the modern middle-aged, middle-management executive who has lost his job in a company reorganization or merger. Too old for an entry-level position, but still too inexperienced to land a senior-level one either, he spends his days, as Robert does at first, trying to salvage his dignity by puttering around the house fixing everything twice and inventing chores that he supposedly had had to put off for lack of time during his working days. (I take particular care to mention this analogy for the business majors in the class.)

There are applications to be made from other of Wordsworth's

works as well. The opening lines of "The World Is Too Much With Us," and especially the phrase "getting and spending," have entered the language as a synonym for the acquisitive, keep-up-with-the-Joneses values encouraged by advertising and deified by the yuppies of the Reagan era. What I call the "stolen skiff" incident in book one of The Prelude (357-400) is nothing more--or less--than teenage joyriding in a "borrowed" car.

And even the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, for all of its stodgy prose, has its contemporary overtones. Having pointed out that the "low and rustic life" that Wordsworth finds such a fertile source for incidents and genuineness of expression goes back to Rousseau's "natural man," I get a few chuckles of recognition when I half-seriously pose that this type also points forward to Crocodile Dundee, though he fares much better in the city than does Michael's son Luke. I add that when Wordsworth complains of the sad state of popular culture in his time--the "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation," the "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse," which he says "blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and. . . reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor," he could as easily be referring to "Gilligan's Island," soap operas, and the current slasher movie or Rambo epic as to the latest excess of the Sturm und Drang school. And on a more positive note, his assertion elsewhere in the "Preface" that "[t]he remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist" are as proper a subject for poetry as any other, I tell my class of the time one of the early astronauts, asked by Mission Control to describe what he was seeing, replied quite seriously, "We

need a poet up here to do that."

The other Romantics are linked to our time as well. Coleridge's aeolian harp, that instrument played by "the correspondent breeze," and a favorite source of metaphor for several Romantics, is after all not very different from the wind chimes that most students have at home. And for a bit of comic relief during our discussion of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," I show to the class an ad for a shower cap that quotes the famous "Water, water everywhere" and then goes on: "but not on your coiffure."

My candidate for the first celebrity superstar is Byron, because not just his writings but his personal life too was the subject of widespread public curiosity and gossip; surely today he would be grist for the People Magazine mill, and, as a student is usually quick to add, the National Enquirer, too. But there is the more serious side as well: when he defended in the House of Lords (that bastion of reaction) the desperate protests of Nottinghamshire weavers thrown out of work by the power loom, he made himself an early-nineteenth-century advocate of what today we call human rights. And when near the end of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage he exults to the Mediterranean that "Man marks the earth with ruin--his control/ Stops with the shore," and that "upon the watery plain. . .nor doth remain/ A shadow of man's ravage," (IV.1605-08) I remind the class that, sadly enough, he wrote those lines before it was possible for Exxon and others to devastate huge areas of ocean with oil slicks.

When we discuss Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," a poem which my students find very difficult, I often try to define what he means by telling them that Intellectual Beauty can be any transcending

ideal--religious, philosophical, moral, political--that gives meaning to one's life. Then I suggest that to Martin Luther King, for example, Intellectual Beauty was equal opportunity and racial equality. I may be stretching Shelley's neoplatonism a bit here, but it seems to help my students.

The Victorians are of course a bit less remote to the students than are the Romantics, and I frequently point out how they, to an even greater degree than the Romantics, had to deal with problems that still plague us today--urbanization, economic injustice, questionings of religious faith, the mixed blessings of technology, and so on. Thus when Carlyle ridicules "Profit and Loss philosophy" in Sartor Resartus, he is talking about today's worship of "the bottom line." The "Plenary Inspiration" that he dismisses in his section on Voltaire has recently reappeared as "biblical inerrancy."

I joke to my students that Walt Whitman anticipated rock and roll by a hundred years when he labeled Tennyson "The Boss." A more apt comparison, though, is the one I make when discussing the way Victorians looked for guidance to Tennyson and other writers. I call him the Victorians' Walter Cronkite: if Uncle Walter was for many years the most trusted man in America, Tennyson was that to many of his contemporaries, from Victoria herself on down, in the years following the publication of In Memoriam. And in that work, the crucial fifty-fourth to fifty-sixth lyrics, the "nature red in tooth and claw" passages on natural selection, can be viewed as Nature's version of genetic engineering; for modern illustration I remind students of all those National Geographic and other wildlife documentaries they have seen showing lions culling out the old, lame,

and weak zebras and antelope.

But Tennyson has his more positive echoes, too. Ulysses' stirring speech to his sailors may remind some students, especially athletes, of a coach's pregame pep talk to a team that is about to go out to face an unknown or heavily favored opponent, and I tell the class that some beleagured Britons, during the darkest days of the Nazi blitzkrieg, looked on Winston Churchill as the reembodiment of King Arthur promised at the end of "The Passing of Arthur."

Browning is one of my favorites; his characters and situations frequently suggest contemporary parallels. Every time I read "Porphyria's Lover" I think of the final shot of Anthony Perkins in "Psycho," smiling to himself as he has a final conversation with his mummy. The Duke of Ferrara is quickly perceived as a Renaissance J. R. Ewing, and last semester "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" reminded a student of the Jim Bakker sex scandal. The character of Fra Lippo Lippi (who I insist would be a terrifically successful used car salesman) raises at least one question for the modern student: does the fact that we are supposed to admire him for his artistic integrity in spite of his personal shortcomings mean that we should likewise, for example, continue to admire an athlete who turns out to be a doper or a cheat? And in trying to get across how Andrea del Sarto can be the best at what he does and yet be second rate at the same time, I ask students who follow sports to consider the team that loses the championship in spite of being made up of superior athletes. They are a bit bigger, a bit stronger, a bit faster than the team who defeats them. But they lack something, that indefinable but transcending element--Andrea calls it variously

"soul", "the insight and the stretch" (113, 116)--whose absence inescapably relegates them, like Andrea, to the position of also-ran.

Matthew Arnold's poetry perhaps lends itself more obviously than that of any other Victorian poet to the sort of application I have been talking about in this paper. The confusion, spiritual numbness, and sense of alienation he speaks of in works like the Marguerite poems and "Dover Beach," as well as his description of "this strange disease of modern life,/ With its sick hurry, its divided aims" in "The Scholar Gypsy" (203-04) have become standard literary themes in the twentieth century. To cite just one application: "To Marguerite--Continued" always reminds me of the Kitty Genovese murder (in which dozens of New York City apartment-dwellers looked down impassively from their windows as a young woman was repeatedly attacked and finally stabbed to death; they didn't even call the police because they didn't want to be involved); or that scene in "Midnight Cowboy" when Joe Buck, newly arrived in Manhattan from Texas, watches unbelievingly as the throng on a busy street smoothly parts and flows around a supine man on the sidewalk, much as a stream flows indifferently around a rock.

The sexual overtones of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" are a commonplace of criticism, but contemporary students can also interpret the Goblins' forbidden fruit as cocaine or heroin: all those authority figures tell them to just say no, but surely one pop won't hurt; moreover, there are all too many voices on the campus or street corner cooing the goblins' litany of "Come buy, come buy" (85). And the first high feels so good: "How should it cloy with length of use?" as Laura rationalizes to herself (133). Her desperate need for

the goblin fruit (166) and her indifference and neglect of all else clearly parallel the affects of narcotic addiction. Like crack, all it took for Laura was one dose.

By the time we get to Thomas Hardy we are in the twentieth century (I assign only his poetry). But of course the first few decades of our century are ancient history to students who were unborn or, at most, pre-schoolers during the Vietnam war. However, they quickly grasp the similarity between the two drifting couples in "A Trampwoman's Tragedy" and the homeless of the 1980's. And when we read "The Convergence of the Twain," students can get some notion of the impact that the sinking of the Titanic must have had on Hardy's contemporaries when I remind them of the Challenger disaster.

No doubt other contemporary parallels to the works I have mentioned, or to others frequently included in an historical survey course, have occurred to you; and maybe you feel that I stretch things a bit, or even trivialize the literature, in suggesting some of the parallels that I do. You may be right. But the students respond. I try not to over-argue the applications that I find, and once I have pointed out a few early in a semester, the brighter and more informed students start to provide them on their own. They also frequently adapt my device for their papers, using an assigned work as a point of departure for discussing how their own experience or observations parallel--often with startling or moving similarity--the theme or situation they find in that work. And that's when the worn-out old survey course really starts to get interesting--for all of us.

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